

07 FIELD GUIDE / GENTLE STARTUP

The One-Page Version

Many people spend a whole day working up the courage to raise something difficult, only to watch the conversation fall apart within seconds. Dr. John Gottman found that how a difficult conversation begins strongly shapes how it ends: a harsh opening, with criticism or blame, tends to escalate, while a gentle one, stating your own feeling and a positive need, tends toward resolution. The sentence that was carried all day usually arrives as a verdict on a partner who was thinking about dinner, and their defensiveness is a startled reaction to being ambushed rather than proof that they do not care. Think of a rocket and an airplane. A rocket goes from standing still to full fire in a second, while an airplane rolls down the runway first and lifts when it is ready. A partner's nervous system needs the runway, which is a question asked before the topic, followed by one sentence with three blanks in it.

Three ways the conversation can begin:

01 | “Is now a good time to talk about something that’s been on my mind?”

02 | If they say not now: “Okay. After the kids are down, or tomorrow morning?”

03 | When you have the time: “I feel ____ about ____, and I need ____.”

A feeling word goes in the first blank, a situation you could point to on a calendar in the second, and something you want more of in the third.

This page is the short version of *The Gentle Startup Script*. The full Field Guide adds every script, the worksheet and a one-page cheat sheet.

couples-conversations.com/fg-soft-startup

One important note: This program is not in place of therapy or clinical treatment or diagnosis, but for education. Many relationships struggle with various issues; this is normal. However, they should always feel safe. If there are any mental health concerns, or concerns for safety, or if the relationship feels dangerous in any way, please seek professional support rather than continuing in this program. When in doubt, it is best to consult with a proper therapist.